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Service-Learning Issue Brief

Third in a Series
Winter 2003

Meeting NCATE Standards Through Service-Learning : Diversity

Increasing Appreciation & Acceptance Of Diverse Students Through Service-Learning

Over the past several years, college campuses across North America have seen an increase in the variety of service-learning projects integrated with academic course goals. Federal and state governments are asking schools, colleges, and departments of education to promote service-learning because of service-learning's unique capacity to promote high-quality learning and civic engagement in its participants. Teacher educators are responding by embedding service-learning into various teacher education courses and they report positive outcomes. For example, experiences in culturally diverse and/or low-income schools and communities juxtaposed with multicultural education courses provide preservice teachers the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the social dynamics of culture, race, and class. Sleeter (2000), however, makes a distinction between community-based service-learning and school-based service-learning experiences. She maintains that a community-based service-learning experience "has the potential to challenge the 'deficit perspective' more powerfully than school field placements" (p. 267). Guadarrama (2000) agrees with Sleeter, stating: "Without this community component...teacher education lacks the capability of effectively educating teacher candidates in the richness and complexity of the community and its integral relationship to the inconsistencies in quality in the schooling practices of students" (p. 228-229). This issue brief explores the necessary components in a multicultural service-learning program that will make it an exceptional experience for teacher candidates and the students they will teach.

At the heart of optimal multicultural service-learning experiences are collaborative relationships. Langseth (2000) states: "The most important relationships in any service-learning program are the ones between campus representatives and those in the community with whom they work" (p. 249). In order to nurture an authentic collaborative relationship, all participants must cross physical, "cultural, and economic borders to develop shared meanings and purposes" (Wade, Boyle-Baise, and O'Grady, 2001, p. 254). In other words, the education faculty must go into the community and the community representative must come to the university to negotiate power differentials, common goals, and long-term commitments. When all participants physically "cross borders," the power differential lessens and meaningful discussions about the multicultural service-learning experience can begin.

Goals for multicultural service-learning experiences must be clear, long term, comprehensive, and address students both affectively and cognitively (Erickson & O'Conner, 2000). For example, Boyle-Baise and Kilbane (2000) suggest course goals include: opportunities "to understand one's cultural identity and social location, to learn about historically-oppressed groups, to examine educational inequality, and to gain strategies to promote educational excellence for all youth" (p.55). Ward (1997) emphasizes that "understanding the dynamics of power in interpersonal and societal relationships must be one of the educational objectives of an effective service-learning curriculum" (p.145). Wade, Boyle-Baise, and O'Grady (2001) stress that teacher candidates need experiences that allow them to "expand their 'emotional comfort zones', particularly in exploring issues of cultural diversity... gain an increasing ability to view the world from multiple perspectives... and reflect on one's own social position in the world in relation to others" (p.249). Another important goal is to have teacher candidates understand the difference between community service and service-learning. Taken together, these goals reflect a balance of service and learning.

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NSLC#6045

NSLTP Partnership

Northeast Region
(CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, RI, VT)
Jane Callahan
Providence College
Providence, Rhode Island
401-865-2501
jcalahan@providence.edu

East Central Region
(DE, DC, IN, MD, MI, OH, PA, VA, WV)
Sue Root
Alma College
Alma, Michigan
517-463-7202
root@alma.edu

Southern Region
(AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, PR, SC, TN, TX, USVI)
Marty Duckenfield
Clemson University
Clemson, South Carolina
864-656-2599
mbdck@clemson.edu

Midwest Region
(IL, IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, OK, SD, WI)
Joseph Erickson
Augsburg College
Minneapolis, Minnesota
612-330-1647
erickson@augsb.org

Northwest Region
(AK, CO, ID, ND, OR, MT, UT, WA, WY)
Robert Howard
University of Washington Tacoma
Tacoma, Washington
253-692-5877
rhoward@u.washington.edu

Southwest Region
(AZ, CA, HI, NV, NM)
Don Hill
Service Learning 2000 Center
San Mateo, California
650-356-0288
don@yscal.org

Consultant
Terry Pickeral
Cascade Educational Consultants
Bellingham, Washington
360-676-9570
tpickeral@ecs.org

Director
Joyce Huith Munro
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
Washington, DC
202-293-2450
jmunro@aacte.org

Program Assistant
Whitney Pickens
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
Washington, DC
202-293-2450
wpickens@aacte.org

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Potential Challenges in Formulating a Successful Multicultural Service-Learning Experience for Preservice Teachers

Administrative Challenges When teacher educators are looking for multicultural service-learning sites in which to place teacher candidates, they have to take into consideration the time and scheduling barriers of all participants. Convenient locations for preservice teachers and community agencies who are willing to adapt to the constraints of teacher preparation programs pose problems (Scales & Koppleman, 1997). Also, universities located in rural areas have special circumstances to overcome, such as travel time, sparse ethnically diverse populations, and transportation.

Collaboration Challenges Gugerty and Swezey (Cited in Langseth, 2000) caution, "Although most institutions of higher education have the best intentions when they embark on service-learning programs, their lack of attention to power differentials and to ethnocentric values creates harm and distrust in many communities" (p.252). The imbalance of power is visible at different levels: between the teacher educator and the community representative, between the community representative and the teacher candidate, and between the candidate and the child or adolescent. The challenge is to help all participants understand and equalize the power differential in the service relationship.

Curriculum Challenges After teacher educators and community representatives have worked out program details and agreed upon common goals, teacher educators must weave teacher candidates' service-learning experiences into their course goals and requirements. It is important to design service-learning activities that help future teachers develop internally ("e.g., consistently uncovering our own backgrounds and biases, pains, and passions"), and externally ("e.g., educating ourselves about historical, theoretical, factual, and other perspectives on multicultural change") (Langseth, 2000, p.257). At the same time that teacher candidates are learning about their own and other cultures, teacher educators and community representatives should be helping these future teachers learn about the communities in which they are completing their experience.

Steps to Attaining the Optimal Multicultural Service-Learning Experience

Step 1: Understand one's cultural identity and social condition. Ward (1997) states that prior to going into a diverse community, teacher candidates should participate in activities intended to invoke self-awareness. He states: "Unpacking the baggage we carry, including the internalized myths we hold about ourselves and others, is crucial cross-cultural work...Knowing one's own personal biases, values, and interests, which stem from one's own culture, will greatly enhance students sensitivity toward other cultural groups" (p.146). Consequently, if course goals are to be accomplished by all participants, teacher educators must first become knowledgeable about their students' backgrounds. An activity that can help a teacher educator learn about students' prior life experiences is an autobiographical sketch. The sketches are helpful in planning course activities and making field placements (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000).

Step 2: Enhance understanding about socially oppressed groups.

Participating in simulations, watching and discussing videos, and reading and analyzing literature are classroom activities in which teacher candidates can raise their self-awareness about power and resource inequities, and cross-cultural differences and stereotypes. Rice and Pollack (2000), and Boyle-Baise and Kilbane (2000) suggest simulations such as "Star Power" and "Bafa Bafa," and reading and analyzing literature such as *There Are No Children Here* (Kotlowitz, 1991). Other suggestions for literature include: *I Won't Learn From You* (Kohl, 1994), *Affirming Diversity* (Nieto, 2000), *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (Kozel, 1991), "Why Are All Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" (Tatum, 1997), or "We Can't Teach What We Don't Know" (Howard, 1999).

Step 3: Learn about the history of the community in which service-learning will take place.

After teacher candidates become more responsive to their personal biases, they need to learn about the history of the community in which they are completing their service-learning experiences. Ward (1997) warns that when prospective teachers are placed in settings to which they are unfamiliar and unaccustomed "before they are prepared and have had opportunities to become acquainted with the social and political realities confronting the residents' lives" (p.143), their stereotypes are reinforced. Simply stated, an understanding of community residents, including the historical and present-day social and political realities that created conditions of poverty (Ward, 1997) is important. When teacher candidates modify their perspectives about the communities and individuals with whom they are interacting, they are more effective. Examples of activities that promote different perspectives about diverse communities include: inviting parents from the community as mentors (Boyle-Baise with Efiom, 2000), providing community partners (Wade, Boyle-Baise, & O'Grady, 2001) for ongoing learning, and interviewing community residents about their values and beliefs. Wade, Boyle-Baise, and O'Grady (2001) augment the role of their community partners by having them read and comment on the teacher candidates' reflective writings, write discussion questions, and lead class discussions with future teachers. Because community partners contribute local information and teacher educators help connect the new ideas to multicultural education concepts, everyone learns more and collaboration is strengthened. Moreover, the power differential becomes less, which makes the community/university relationship stronger.

Step 4: Perceive of service-learning as a mutually-beneficial experience.

Teacher candidates often perceive of service-learning as "something that you do in your spare time, or...is about helping those less fortunate" (Rice & Pollack, 2000, p.123). The "missionary" view that some teacher candidates may have of the multicultural service-learning experience should be changed to a reciprocal relationship. By helping prospective teachers understand oppression and discrimination, mutual respect between teacher and child can be improved.

Learn More...

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Recommendations for Exceptional Multicultural Service-Learning Experiences

Recommendations to Teacher Educators

- ◆ Choose sites that "view youth and families through an affirmative lens, as people with diverse resources" (Wade, R. C., Boyle-Baise, M., & O'Grady, C. 2001, p. 254).
- ◆ Choose sites that encourage "direct involvement of teacher candidates in their programs" (Wade, et. al., 2001, p. 256)
- ◆ Establish a collaborative relationship with community agencies and nurture those that are effective
- ◆ Identify clear, comprehensive goals in collaboration with the community representative and/or advisory board for the multicultural course and service-learning experience
- ◆ Learn about the life experiences of teacher candidates prior to making placements
- ◆ Plan meaningful, reflective, developmentally appropriate activities that help teacher candidates learn cognitively and affectively
- ◆ Create assessment plans and share with community representatives and teacher candidates at the beginning of the semester
- ◆ Allow time at the beginning of the course to prepare teacher candidates about the community in which they will be completing their service-learning experience
- ◆ Guide teacher candidates "through the process of transforming their service experience into a learning experience" (Rice & Pollack, 2000, p. 124)
- ◆ Maintain continual communication with community representatives
- ◆ Emphasize the difference between community service and service-learning
- ◆ Recognize your own shortcomings about experiences or perspectives of multiculturalism

Recommendations to Community Representatives

- ◆ Work collaboratively with teacher educators
- ◆ Affirm the cultural diversity in the community
- ◆ Challenge inequities
- ◆ Create supportive places where teacher candidates can feel comfortable asking questions
- ◆ Provide guidance and support through ongoing feedback and dialogue
- ◆ Provide direct instruction about the community and its residents issues and concerns
- ◆ Integrate teacher candidates into activities that involve the whole agency
- ◆ Make good use of the short time teacher candidates are at the agency

Recommendations to Teacher Candidates

- ◆ Reflect on and learn about your own culture and the stereotypes and prejudices that it brings
- ◆ Recognize your own shortcomings about experiences or perspectives of multiculturalism
- ◆ Learn to understand, appreciate, and accept the cultural group values, beliefs, and practices of the community in which you are completing your experience
- ◆ Learn about the history, intergroup relations, larger social issues and power dynamics of the community in which you are completing your experience
- ◆ Be open, enthusiastic, flexible, and willing to take an extra step to help the community agency

Langseth (2000) reminds us that multicultural issues are complex and individuals need time to develop affectively and cognitively. For preservice teachers who have minimal previous interaction with people from different cultural or ethnic groups, more than one experience may be necessary to develop necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work in diverse schools and communities. Along with additional long-term experiences, it is imperative that debriefing activities juxtapose the teacher candidates' service-learning activity to circumvent reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Consequently, we need to create a plethora of ways to integrate multicultural education and service-learning across our teacher education programs.

Authored by Carol E. Marxen, University of Minnesota, Morris

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Issue Brief 1 (Winter 2002)
Issue Brief 2 (Spring 2002)

Meeting NCATE Standards Through Service-Learning: Professional & Pedagogical Knowledge
Meeting NCATE Standards Through Service-Learning: Dispositions
